

## El Salvador Faces a Turning Point in the February 28<sup>th</sup> Elections

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*These materials are distributed by Invest El Salvador on behalf of the Government of El Salvador. Additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.*

El Salvador today is a polarized society. A long history of dictatorships followed by a vicious civil war ended with the promise of peace and opportunity - a promise that has not been kept. Since the peace accords in 1992, two parties have dominated the political scene and parliament – the ARENA, which came from death squads, and the FMLN, which was formed by former insurgent guerrillas. Between them, they have ruled for three decades, each proving as corrupt as the other, both equally incapable of adequately addressing the massive problems in El Salvador of gang violence, extortion and the economic crisis which has held back development. Their collective failure since 1992 has resulted in significant emigration from my country, including some 3 millions Salvadorans feeling obliged to enter the US by one means or another in search of a dignified life.

Since his inauguration in 2019, breaking the cycle of the two dominant parties, President Bukele has enjoyed unprecedented popular confidence, regularly polling around 90% approval. He initially rose into the public eye after his successful mayorship of San Salvador, where he continuously prioritized the citizens of the capital rather than any partisan agenda.

According to independent political polls, the February 28<sup>th</sup> municipal and legislative elections are likely to see the parliament shift from ARENA-FMLN domination to a clear majority for the President's newly formed party, Nuevas Ideas. The old parties have tried – and failed – to block this outcome. Their current hold on the National Assembly provides their last chance to block the President's reform efforts. Within the last month – and with no grounds to do so – they attempted a type of legislative coup to impeach Bukele in order to skew the election results. Over three decades they have filled all the institutions of state with their supporters including the office that controls the electoral machinery. There are emerging fears in El Salvador that they could resort to dubious practices to prevent the predicted outcome.

Perhaps worse, there has been a baseless media campaign claiming with no evidence that Bukele has bribed the gangs to ensure his electoral victory. By tarnishing the election process with such assertions and challenging the incoming administration's legitimacy with false claims of criminal influence, the old opposition could simply be creating further instability in El Salvador.

The future of my country is in the balance. Over the last year, gang violence has been reduced significantly, but the economy continues to face challenges brought on by the COVID crisis. Recovery will be difficult, even more so if it is to be achieved in a period of willfully sustained political instability.

Such scenarios suit neither Salvadoran or U.S. interests, and threaten the important bilateral relationship between our two countries. President Bukele is focused on bringing new economic

stability to El Salvador, to allow our citizens to build dignified lives in their home country, without migrating. Every effort has to be made, including by the Organization of American States (OAS), to ensure an electoral process free of fraud or false disputes over outcomes.

The new U.S. Administration should look calmly at Bukele's record to date, and his plans once he has the support of the National Assembly in May. Together, they will bring the peace dividend to the people of El Salvador, which they have been denied for nearly three decades. This is a rare opportunity for political stability and progress, and it is within our reach. Everyone should be pulling in the same direction to grasp this historic opportunity and not allow false accusations or electoral manipulation to derail El Salvador's stability yet again. It is crucial that we let democracy speak on February 28<sup>th</sup>, and that the vote reflects only the will of the Salvadoran people.